COMPANIONED RETREATS SERIES

LEARNING TO DELIGHT AGAIN

A RETREAT FOR
JOY, BEAUTY, AND PLAY

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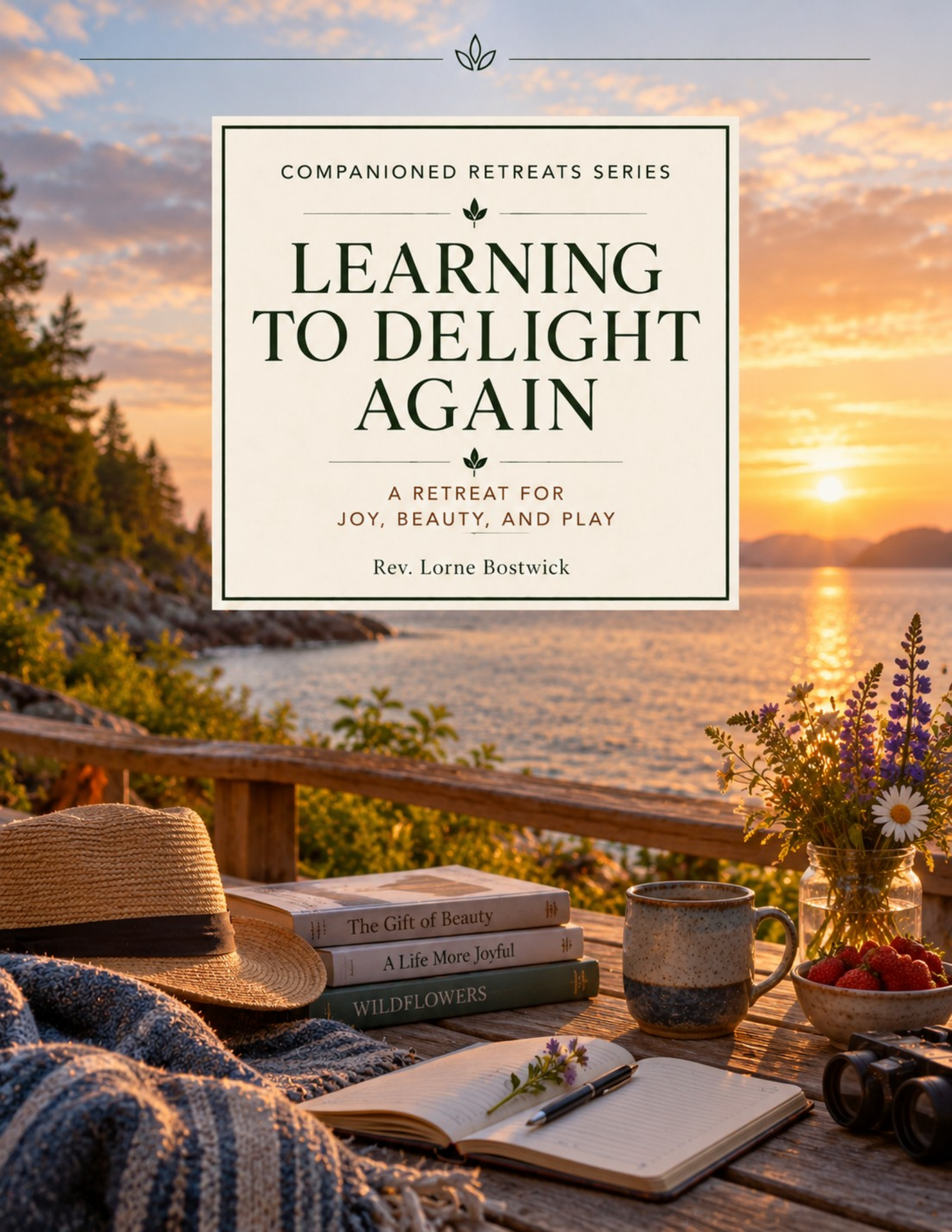

Learning to Delight Again

A Companioned Retreat for Joy, Beauty, and Play

[Insert the approved Common Introduction here.]

Learning to Delight Again

There is serious work in ministry.

People become ill. Families grieve. Relationships fracture. Congregations struggle. Communities suffer. The world gives you more than enough to care about.

You know how to enter those places.

You also know how to create joy for other people.

You plan celebrations. Choose music. Bless marriages. Baptize children. Set tables. Tell stories. Decorate sanctuaries. Welcome people home. Help communities mark occasions worth remembering.

You may have become quite good at setting the table.

But somewhere along the way, it is possible to forget that you are also invited to sit down and eat.

Joy, beauty, pleasure, creativity, sensuality, and play are not distractions from a faithful life. They belong to the goodness of being alive.

Scripture is surprisingly insistent about this.

Bread is eaten with gladness.

Wine gladdens the heart.

People sing and dance.

Gardens grow.

Fruit is sweet.

Oil makes the face shine.

Lovers delight in one another.

Jesus goes to dinner.

A wedding runs out of wine, and abundance appears.

The lilies are clothed in beauty beyond Solomon’s glory.

God could have made a world merely sufficient for survival.

Instead, there are colors.

Flavors.

Fragrances.

Music.

Water that feels wonderful against the skin.

Sunlight.

Flowers.

Laughter.

And human beings who make paintings and quilts and gardens and songs and stories and excellent meals.

This retreat is an invitation to receive some of that goodness.

Not because delight will make you a better pastor.

Not because pleasure will restore your productivity.

Not because you need to learn how to have fun correctly.

For these days, there is nothing useful you need to accomplish with joy.

You are allowed to enjoy being alive.

Choosing a Place

Let the Place Help

For this retreat especially, choose somewhere you would genuinely enjoy being.

Beauty matters.

Perhaps a cabin beside a lake.

A friend’s cottage on the ocean.

A room with a remarkable view.

A mountain lodge.

A retreat center with beautiful grounds and good food.

A small resort with a pool, hot tub, sauna, or massage available.

A campsite or backpacking destination, if carrying what you need into a beautiful place is pleasure rather than ordeal.

A boat anchored safely in a quiet cove, if you have the experience and access to make that possible.

You are not looking for the most austere place where you can prove you know how to retreat.

Look for somewhere that makes you think:

I would love to spend two days there.

That is reason enough.

Before You Arrive

Bring Things You Enjoy

Bring your Bible.

Then bring some things simply because you enjoy them.

A novel. Perhaps even a romantic novel.

Poetry.

A beautiful book of photography or art.

A camera.

A swimsuit.

Music you love and whatever you need to listen to it.

An instrument, if making music gives you pleasure.

Watercolors. Colored pencils. Knitting. Cross-stitch. A sketchbook. A small model. A puzzle.

Something playful.

Something beautiful.

Something delicious.

You don’t need all of these.

Choose what sounds good.

If there is a restaurant nearby you have wanted to try, consider making a reservation.

If the place offers a massage, hot tub, sauna, pool, or another experience that helps your body relax and receive, you might arrange for that too.

This is not an itinerary.

It is permission to arrive prepared for pleasure.

If something pleasurable requires advance preparation, take care of it before you leave home.

Then come.

The First Evening

Receive the Place

Don’t begin with a question.

Arrive.

Open the curtains.

Step onto the porch.

Look at the water.

Notice the room.

Unpack slowly.

If there is a view, give it your attention before giving your attention to anything else.

If the evening is beautiful, go outside.

If rain is falling, listen.

If there is a fireplace and the evening is cool, light it.

You have nowhere else to be.

Before Dinner

Read Ecclesiastes 9:7.

“Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart.”

That’s all.

Go eat.

Choose something you like.

If someone else prepared it, receive their work.

If you are cooking, make something you enjoy making.

Taste it.

Linger.

Have dessert if dessert sounds good.

Don’t turn dinner into a spiritual exercise.

Dinner already knows how to be dinner.

Give Music Your Attention

Sometime this evening, choose music you love.

Not background music.

Music worth listening to.

Perhaps an entire album.

A symphony.

Jazz.

Folk music.

A singer whose voice has accompanied part of your life.

Something exuberant.

Something beautiful.

Something that makes you close your eyes.

Something that makes you want to move.

Let music be the only thing happening for a while.

Don’t read while you listen.

Don’t answer email.

Don’t straighten the room.

If you find yourself singing, sing.

If you want to dance and nobody is watching, this seems like an excellent time.

If somebody is watching, you can decide how much that matters.

Before Sleep

Read Psalm 4:8.

“I will both lie down and sleep in peace.”

Notice the bed.

Clean sheets.

A comfortable pillow.

The pleasure of being tired and allowed to sleep.

Get in.

The First Morning

Taste

Before breakfast, read Psalm 34:8.

“O taste and see that the LORD is good.”

Today, take the verbs seriously.

Taste.

See.

Have breakfast somewhere pleasant if you can.

Good coffee.

Fruit.

Bread.

Eggs.

Something warm.

Something sweet.

Something you don’t usually take time to make.

Don’t read while you eat.

Look around.

Taste your food.

Let morning be good.

Go Looking for Beauty

Let Your Eyes Feast

Read Matthew 6:28–29.

“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”

Consider the lilies.

Jesus asks his hearers to look at something beautiful.

Not because it is useful.

Not because there is work to be done with it.

Simply notice what God has made.

Then go outside and **let it be beautiful.**

Take a camera with you.

Don’t go looking for impressive photographs. Look for what makes your eyes want to stay.

A flower.

Light on water.

The shape of a tree.

Clouds moving across a mountain.

A bird.

Weathered wood.

Sunlight through leaves.

A shell.

Someone’s red canoe.

Something tiny you almost walked past.

Something so large you cannot fit it into the frame.

Let your eyes feast.

When something delights you, take its picture.

You aren’t documenting your retreat.

No captions.

No posting.

You are gathering beauty.

Let your soul feast on it now.

During these days, return to the photographs whenever you want and let your soul feast again.

Water

If water is part of the place you chose, let it become part of the day.

Swim.

Float.

Wade.

Paddle.

Sit on a dock with your feet in the water.

Perhaps there is a pool or hot tub.

Or take an unnecessarily long shower.

Before you begin, read Isaiah 55:1:

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.”

Then close the Bible.

Feel the water.

Its temperature.

Its movement.

The way your body feels in it.

There is nothing to figure out.

Sometimes the body receives a gift before the mind has decided what to do with it. Let the water be enough.

If Rain Offers Itself

If rain comes during these days, you might resist the instinct to stay inside.

If it is warm enough and conditions are safe, leave the raincoat behind.

Go outside.

Walk slowly.

Let yourself get wet.

Feel the drops on your face, your hair, your arms.

Let the rain massage you.

Let it run over you.

Smell the wet earth.

Listen to rain falling on leaves, water, roofs, and ground.

For a little while, imagine the rain as God’s baptism of the earth and everything in it.

Not a baptism you perform.

One you receive.

You are standing in the same water as trees and grass and birds and soil.

Let yourself belong to what is being washed.

Then go inside.

Dry off.

Put on something warm.

Enjoy becoming warm and dry again.

Midday

Receive Something Good

Read Psalm 104:14–15.

The psalm celebrates a world in which God brings food from the earth, wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.

Necessity and pleasure belong in the same song.

Now eat.

Perhaps you packed something wonderful.

Perhaps there is a café nearby.

Perhaps somebody else prepared the meal.

Perhaps bread and cheese on the dock are exactly right.

Receive what is good.

The Afternoon

Absolutely Unnecessary Things

Do something that does not need doing.

This may be harder than it sounds.

Read your novel.

Lose yourself in the photography book you brought.

Knit.

Build the model.

Work a puzzle.

Paint badly.

Make something with LEGO.

Sketch the view.

Lie in a hammock.

Take the boat out.

Play cards.

Throw a fishing line into the water and remain unconcerned about whether anything bites.

Take a nap.

If you arranged a massage, go receive it.

If there is a sauna, hot tub, or pool, enjoy it.

Before you begin, read 1 Timothy 4:4:

“For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving.”

Then receive something.

You are not filling time until the next spiritual experience.

This is the experience.

Notice what it is like simply to receive. You do not have to make the warmth, the water, the touch, the story, the play, or the pleasure useful. For a little while, it is enough that something good is being given and you are there to receive it.

Beauty Made by Human Hands

Creation does not have a monopoly on beauty.

Human beings make things.

Perhaps this is one of the ways creatures made in the image of a Creator respond to the world they have been given.

Listen to music you have never had time to hear all the way through.

Look slowly through photographs.

Read a poem aloud simply because you love the sound of the words.

Study a painting.

Notice architecture.

Hold something beautifully made.

Play an instrument.

Make something yourself.

You don’t need talent for this.

You aren’t entering it in a show.

You aren’t even required to finish it.

Let someone else’s creativity—or your own—give you pleasure.

Toward Evening

A Garden of Delight

Read Song of Songs 2:10–13.

Don’t turn it into an allegory.

Let it be poetry.

Winter passing.

Rain ending.

Flowers appearing.

Birdsong.

Figs ripening.

Vines blossoming.

Fragrance.

A beloved voice saying:

“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

The biblical world is not embarrassed by beauty.

Neither do you need to be.

Let the evening come.

The Second Evening

The Wedding

Before dinner, read John 2:1–11.

Tonight, don’t study the sign.

Notice the wedding.

People have gathered.

There is food.

There is wine.

There is celebration.

Jesus is there.

And when the wine runs out, abundance enters the story.

Close the Bible.

Go enjoy dinner.

If this is the meal you planned especially for pleasure, let it be wonderful.

Order what you want.

Cook something you love.

Eat outside.

Have fresh seafood if you are near the coast.

Open the good chocolate.

Stay for dessert.

Don’t apologize to yourself for any of it.

You spend enough of your life setting the table.

Tonight, remember:

You are also among those invited to eat.

Play

Let the rest of the evening be playful.

Play cards.

Build something.

Skip stones.

Put on music that makes it difficult to sit still.

Take ridiculous photographs.

Go for a moonlight swim where it is safe.

Sit in the hot tub.

Make a fire.

Laugh.

Do something you haven’t done since you were considerably younger.

Or discover that what sounds delightful tonight is doing absolutely nothing.

Play does not need to be assigned.

See what happens.

Under the Stars

If the night is clear, go outside before bed.

Read Psalm 19:1.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.”

Then look up.

You don’t need to identify the constellations.

You don’t need to know how far away anything is.

You don’t need to make the night sky mean something.

Look.

Stay until you have seen enough.

Or until you realize you haven’t.

Sometimes wonder has no conclusion. It simply enlarges the world for a while.

Before you sleep, read Psalm 16:11:

“In your presence there is fullness of joy.”

Don’t ask whether you experienced enough joy today.

Turn out the light.

Sleep.

The Second Morning

Let the Morning Surprise You

When you wake, look outside.

See what kind of morning has arrived.

Maybe sunrise is spectacular.

Maybe fog has erased the view.

Maybe rain is hammering the roof.

Maybe the lake is perfectly still.

Maybe gulls are making an unreasonable amount of noise.

Meet the morning that is actually there.

Read Psalm 118:24:

“This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Not some better day.

This one.

Breakfast

Before eating, read Acts 2:46.

“They broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.”

Gladness belongs at the table.

Eat.

The Morning

Choose What Delights You

There is no assigned activity this morning.

Look at the possibilities around you.

What would you enjoy?

Do that.

Return to something from yesterday.

Try something you haven’t done.

Go back to bed.

Take the kayak out.

Finish the chapter.

Listen to another album.

Look again at the photographs you gathered yesterday.

Find a bakery.

Draw.

Swim.

Sit in the hot tub.

Go somewhere simply because you want to see what is there.

Do nothing.

You don’t need to choose the most spiritually meaningful possibility.

Choose what delights you.

Before Lunch

Jesus at the Table

Read Luke 7:33–34.

John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine.

The Son of Man came **“eating and drinking.”**

Jesus’ life repeatedly takes him to tables.

Meals matter in the Gospels.

So does company.

So does hospitality.

Have lunch.

The Final Afternoon

What Did You Enjoy?

Before you pack, look around.

Look at the photographs you took.

Look at what you made.

Remember what you ate.

The music you heard.

The water.

The rain, if it came.

The view.

The book.

The bed.

The laughter.

The feel of something.

The taste of something.

The beauty of something.

You don’t need to interpret any of it.

If you want to put something into words, find any piece of paper.

Not necessarily a journal.

Write:

I enjoyed . . .

Finish the sentence as many times as you like.

Not:

I learned . . .

Not:

I realized . . .

Not:

I should . . .

I enjoyed . . .

Perhaps one of those sentences will remain with you. Perhaps none will. The point is not to extract a lesson from these days, but to recognize the goodness you actually received.

Keep the paper if you want.

Or leave it behind.

Before You Leave

Every Good Gift

Read James 1:17.

“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above.”

Look around one more time.

Perhaps these days have reminded you of something you had forgotten.

Perhaps they have given you permission for something you already knew.

Or perhaps you simply had a lovely couple of days.

Don’t diminish that.

You do not have to transform pleasure into usefulness before it becomes worthy of your time.

Beauty does not need to improve you.

Play does not need an outcome.

Rest does not have to earn its place.

A wonderful meal does not require a theological justification.

And joy does not become holy only when you give it to somebody else.

God has given you a life capable of receiving delight.

Receive it.

Going Home

You are returning to ministry.

There will be serious things waiting for you.

There always are.

But seriousness is not the same thing as faithfulness.

There are people in your life and ministry who need compassion, courage, wisdom, truth, justice, and care.

They also need beauty.

Celebration.

Creativity.

Music.

Good food.

Laughter.

Play.

Wonder.

They need people who know that the world contains sorrow and still know how to delight in what is good.

You may be one of the people who helps make those things possible.

But remember **what these days have given you:**

The gifts of God do not travel only through you to everyone else.

Some of them are for you.

You are allowed to sit at the table.

You are allowed to taste.

To listen.

To touch.

To make.

To play.

To laugh.

To look.

To receive.

And sometimes the faithful response to a good gift is very simple.

Enjoy it.